



Irish Uplands Forum

Submission to Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine on Environmental Assessment of the draft CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 (with particular reference to Agri-Environment Climate Measures: Cooperation Option)

6th December 2021

Background

The Irish Uplands Forum (IUF) is a voluntary body, established in 1995, that pursues a partnership approach to sustainable management of upland areas. Our membership, which is all-island, includes farmers, recreational users, ecologists, geographers, tourism and other countryside service providers, who represent those who live, work or recreate in the Irish Uplands.

By 'Uplands' we refer to those lands above 200m, which are generally zones of extensive farming, frequently under commonage. Uplands perform vital ecological services that include important natural habitats, water storage and flood attenuation. The preservation of upland landscapes is essential in maintaining and promoting biodiversity. Europe's uplands, and those on the island of Ireland in particular, are associated with high nature-value farmland. Uplands' abilities to deliver ecosystem services are, however, under threat from climate change and land abandonment. Maintaining vibrant upland farming communities is important, not just in socio-economic terms, but also in respect of conservation and biodiversity.

IUF promote evidence-based approaches in our work with upland communities and decision-makers, and we commission and undertake research, organise workshops, enable networking and disseminate best practice in the sustainable management of upland areas.

In the context of sustainable agriculture in the uplands, IUF has participated in or facilitated meetings to discuss the development of upland European Innovation Projects. A landmark research project commissioned by IUF provided a national profile of upland farming¹. Direct assistance has been given to several community based EIPs and, since their establishment, networking events have been held to support learning and knowledge exchange.

¹ <https://irishuplandsforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Profile-of-Irelands-Uplands-Full-Report-11.pdf>



IUF has already made a detailed submission to DAFM on the proposed CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027². This current document refers to the proposal for *Agri-environment Climate Measures: Co-operation Option* under Pillar 2 to support upland farming. IUF recently organized a workshop in Letterfrack, West Connemara (28 October 2021), for upland EIPs, ecologists and rural development specialists which included detailed consideration among participants about the nature of the preferred scheme (as outlined in pages 394 -399 of the descriptive document). This submission is based on the results of that workshop and discussions within the board of IUF.

Where should this measure be applied?

'Agri environment climate measure; cooperation option' should apply to all uplands as these are areas generally of high biodiversity value, featuring soils of high carbon content which have potential for active carbon sequestration.

Its application to the country and uplands should build on the record of upland European Innovation Projects (EIPs) by expanding from their original locations or/and linking them together. This would allow original members to remain involved and, based on their learnings, to act as champions and promoters to other areas. It provides recognition for the efforts of pioneers and it is an effective way of building momentum and capacity among wider communities.

Numbers in each operational area should grow organically from years 1-5. This approach would follow the style of development of the successful Burren scheme.

How long should the measure be operational?

The eco scheme for the Uplands should cover a ten (10) year period as, given the topographic setting and particular ecologies, changes to habitat quality happens slowly in the uplands. It may be possible to monitor change for specific aspects on a shorter time scale.

Financial Incentives

The financial rewards should commence at a level that is at least equivalent to current rewards and should be planned to increase in response to the achievement of agreed targets for the measure. It will be important to ensure that rewards are linked to outcomes i.e. results based measurement and not simply determined by a formula for sharing the fund based on participation.

Expertise required to implement the measure

Experience of the EIPs confirms that at least two full-time upland ecologists are needed to cover AECM's in the uplands. All advisors from an agricultural background should have ecological expertise and all staff should have a commitment to broader community

² 210829_Irish Uplands Forum_Submission_DAFM Draft Interventions for CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 – submitted 31/08/2021 to DAFM online consultation.



development. Relevant expertise should be developed through continuous professional development courses during its duration.

Work required prior to roll-out at National level

We recommend the following actions prior to roll-out at national level:

- A small *National Steering Group (NSG)* should be set up immediately with representatives of DAFM, NPWS and Teagasc ; relevant NGOs (Farming for Nature Technical Group funded by the Heritage Council, Irish Environmental Network (representing national biodiversity NGO's), the Irish Uplands Forum) and farm organisations (IFA and INFHA).
- The first task of this NSG is to carry out a brief review (SWOT) of upland EIPs, to inform the nature of the AECM's for the Uplands.
- The second priority is to define geographic areas covered by individual operational groups. It is proposed that particular recognition is given to uplands within these zones and the presence of EIPs.
- This NSG group would also arrange for ecologists currently working on EIPs to discuss, with NPWS and DAFM, the following general issues:
 - 1) nature of score cards
 - 2) measures to deal with Appropriate Assessment and the following specific issues relevant to the uplands
 - 3) resources to treat areas with considerable amounts of bare peat
 - 4) guidelines to encourage co-operation among commonage stakeholders

Work required prior to roll-out of Operational Groups

We recommend the following actions associated with roll-out at local level:

The establishment of an operational group with representatives of relevant officials from Leader companies, Heritage Officers from local authorities, LAWPRO as well as Teagasc, NPWS rangers, representatives of farming organisations and local champions i.e. people who have had prior experience of EIPs and similar projects. All operational groups should be chaired *jointly* by 1) a farmer and 2) administrator/community development, ecologist or agricultural specialist. The farmer should have been a participant in an EIP programme.

Operational groups should have a local base to deal with queries from farmers and provide assistance with technical issues Appropriate Assessment (AA) etc.

The first task of the group should be to carry out participatory research to identify more specific boundaries of potential operational areas based on biodiversity/location of HNVP and community identity. Particular priority should be given to the uplands in each operational area. Ecologists should carry out preliminary research to identify key management issues and best management approaches. The nature of financial supports for works to be supported financially should be discussed in the operational group and agreed with farmers.





If commonages are a feature of operational areas, work should start immediately to develop informal working arrangements (through 'Walk and Talk' events) among the commonage rights holders.

Measurement of Success

The success of the Agri-environment Climate Measure; co-operation option nationally and locally should be articulated in terms of learning objectives and biodiversity outcomes, and not simply by numbers and budgets. Therefore, the measure should be designed and set up to evaluate, on an ongoing basis, the nature of learning and biodiversity improvements within 1) the individual operational groups and 2) the national group.

END

Submitted on behalf of the Irish Uplands Forum

Yours sincerely,

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██████████ *Irish Uplands Forum*
08 December 2021

